ESD Model: Mobilizing Muslim Imams and Religious Leaders as “Champions” of Reproductive Health and Family Planning

There is growing recognition that religious leaders and communities of faith play an important role in shaping health seeking behavior, especially in conservative, traditional societies where science, religion, politics, culture, and morality intersect. They often act as arbiters of morality, ethics and of what is prescribed or proscribed by faith. Their opinions strongly dictate the behavioral norms of their communities, in particular, maternal, neonatal and child health. In environments where Islamic teachings are thought to be prohibitions, Imams and other Muslim religious leaders are able to play an intrinsic role, re-interpreting, authenticating and guiding their congregations according to foundational Islamic beliefs. Consequently, activities supported by religious leaders and religious institutions have the potential to promote and sustain positive changes in maternal, neonatal and child health, including changes in behaviors related to pregnancy spacing and delaying the first pregnancy.

To engage Muslim religious leaders as actors in development and “champions” of reproductive health and family planning at the national and/or local level, the Extending Service Delivery (ESD) project applied the following model (also seen in Figure 1 on the back page of this brief).

Phase I: Planning

- **Identifying champions and building alliances** to promote stakeholder buy-in.
  
  In Yemen, ESD identified prominent, charismatic religious leaders with progressive interpretations of Islam from all sects by working closely with key stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Public Health and Population, the Ministry of Endowment and Guidance, and a local NGO, the Social Guidance Foundation.

- **Fostering partnerships** to build local ownership and sustainability. ESD allied with a local implementing partner or institution in each country where it successfully engaged religious leaders; together, they designed the intervention.

  In Bangladesh, ESD partnered with a local organization, the Population Services and Training Centre, to implement a religious leaders’ activity in two rural areas. In Pakistan, ESD partnered with the Ministry of Population and Welfare to design and implement the activity at the national level.

- **Adapting ESD’s generic religious leaders’ facilitator manual** to the local context to guarantee culturally sensitive information. This includes the compilation of local fatwas in support of reproductive health and family planning, and tailoring the content of the training manual to address the gaps and challenges identified after the baseline assessment has been completed and analyzed.

  In Pakistan, ESD compiled local fatwas representing the views of sects of Sunni and Shi’a Muslims and thereby obtained the endorsement of the Council of Islamic Ideology.
Phase II: Implementation

- **Capacity building** to strengthen the capability of the partner to build the capacity of religious leaders and monitor their outreach activities. Working with a strong local partner helped religious leaders to mobilize their communities in support of reproductive health and family planning, and to act as agents of change. During this stage, a South-to-South exchange program/study tour helped religious leaders in learning about a neighboring country model for engaging religious leaders in FP/MNCH.

  In Yemen, Imams/religious leaders traveled to Egypt to observe and learn firsthand from the experiences of Muslim and Christian religious leaders working in rural areas.

- **Outreach services** to disseminate health messages and supporting fatwas that encourage community members to adopt healthier behaviors. Working solo or in tandem with others, such as peers, service providers, and mobile health teams, religious leaders throughout ESD’s programs encouraged community members to adopt healthier reproductive health and family planning behaviors through outreach activities.

  In Nigeria, religious sermons and individual counseling complement house-to-house visits by female community health workers.

**STEPS IN IMPLEMENTING ESD’S MODEL ON RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

**PHASE I: PLAN**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>STEP A</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUILD ALLIANCES</strong></td>
<td><strong>FOSTER PARTNERSHIPS</strong></td>
<td><strong>ADAPT TO LOCAL CONTEXT</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. BUILD LOCAL SUPPORT BASE BY:</td>
<td>1. SELECT LOCAL IMPLEMENTING PARTNER/INSTITUTION.</td>
<td>1. CONDUCT BASELINE AND ANALYZE RESULTS.</td>
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<td>• OBTAINING BUY-IN FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS (GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND FORMAL/INFORMAL LEADERS) AT FEDERAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS.</td>
<td>2. DESIGN RELIGIOUS LEADERS PROGRAM FOR NATIONAL, REGIONAL, OR COMMUNITY LEVEL WITH LOCAL COUNTERPART. IDENTIFY:</td>
<td>2. COMPILE LOCAL FATWAS IN SUPPORT OF RH/FP/MNCH AND IDENTIFY REGIONAL FATWAS THAT CAN BE ADAPTED TO LOCAL CONTEXT.</td>
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<td>• IDENTIFYING CHAMPIONS – (I) PROGRESSIVE AND CHARISMATIC RELIGIOUS LEADERS FROM ALL RELIGIOUS SECTS, AND (II) HEALTH PROVIDERS WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS.</td>
<td>- HOW TRAINING OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS WILL BE DONE (ONE-LEVEL OR CASCADE TRAINING).</td>
<td>3. OBTAIN ENDORSEMENT OF FATWAS FROM HEADS OF RELIGIOUS SECTS FOLLOWED BY THE HIGHER COUNCIL OF RELIGION OR MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS.</td>
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<td>• IM&amp;E SYSTEM—INCLUDING INDICATORS AND TOOLS SUCH AS, BASELINE/ENDLINE.</td>
<td>4. CONTEXTUALIZE RELEVANT SECTIONS OF ESD’S TRAINING GUIDE TO COUNTRY SPECIFIC NEEDS TAKING INTO ACCOUNT BASELINE RESULTS. INCORPORATE RELEVANT FATWAS INTO TRAINING GUIDE.</td>
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<td>• SELECTION CRITERIA AND NUMBER OF TRAINERS.</td>
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<td>• TRAINING NEEDS ON TECHNICAL AND PROGRAMMATIC AREAS.</td>
<td>5. COMPLETE FACILITATOR GUIDE AND TRAINEE HANDOUTS; OBTAIN ENDORSEMENT FROM KEY RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON CONTENT OF MATERIALS.</td>
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<td>• VENUES FOR TRAINING, DATES OF TRAINING, FOLLOW-UP MEETING.</td>
<td>6. DEVELOP DATA BASE AND FINALIZE DATA COLLECTION FORMS FOR OUTREACH ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING: WHO WILL COLLECT THE FORMS; WHO WILL ENTER THE DATA; WHAT DATA SYSTEM WILL BE USED, AND; HOW THE DATA WILL BE COMMUNICATED WITH THE PROJECT COORDINATOR.</td>
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<td>• DECIDE HOW ACTION PLANS DEVELOPED BY TRAINEES IN THE WORKSHOP WILL BE INTEGRATED INTO THEIR EXISTING OUTREACH ACTIVITIES.</td>
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**STEPS IN Implementing ESD’s Model on Religious Leaders**

1. **Build Local Support Base by:**
   - **Build Alliances**
     - **Phase I: Plan**
       - Working with religious leaders, religious sects, and (ii) health providers
         - Charismatic religious leaders from all levels (federal, regional, and local government officials and formal/informal organizations)
       - Obtaining buy-in from key stakeholders

2. **Design Religious Leaders Program for National**
   - **Step A**
     - Select local implementing partners/institutions
       - Members, including their roles and responsibilities
       - Appoint project coordinator and team
     - The data will be communicated with the project coordinator, dates of follow-up meetings.
     - Venues for training, dates of training, selection criteria and number of trainers.
     - Training needs on technical and programmatic areas.
     - Develop data base and finalize data collection tools such as baseline/endline M&E system—including indicators and data collection forms.
     - Revise and update workplan in light of results.
   - **Step B**
     - Conduct training workshop(s)
       - Reproductive health, family planning and Islam; relationships between men & women in Islam; safe motherhood; promoting safe pregnancy & childbirth, including Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancy (HTSP); breastfeeding; introduction to youth development; STIs and HIV/AIDS; prevention of violence against women; leadership skills; introduction to youth development; timing and spacing of pregnancy (HTSP); breastfeeding; introduction to youth development; relationships between men & women in Islam; safe motherhood; promoting safe pregnancy & childbirth, including Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancy (HTSP); breastfeeding; introduction to youth development; STIs and HIV/AIDS; prevention of violence against women; leadership skills; community mobilization; action plans.
     - Assist trainees in:
       - Development of their action plans
       - Integration of their action plans into existing outreach activities
       - Training religious leaders and service providers to work together
       - Training on how to fill out data forms
       - Project management, e.g. knowing how to contact project coordinator, dates of follow-up meetings
       - Principles on supportive supervision

**Phase III: Documentation & Dissemination**

- **Documentation and dissemination** to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding family planning and reproductive health at the community level. ESD conducted an endline assessment and analyzed data from reproductive health/family planning clinics to note increases in uptake of services as a result of activities with religious leaders. These results were documented and widely disseminated alongside challenges and lessons learned.

- ***Monitoring and evaluation*** is an ongoing process that informs and refines the activities undertaken in three phases of the model. ESD developed a set of 14 indicators to track activities, including sermons, social and religious events, meetings held and trainings attended by religious leaders, as well as standardized pre- and post-test on knowledge and attitudes.

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**PHASE II: IMPLEMENT**

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In Yemen, doctors from the Ministry of Health provided additional training to religious leaders during the quarterly meetings.
FIGURE 1

ESD MODEL
Engaging Muslim Religious Leaders as “Champions” of Reproductive Health and Family Planning

PHASES

1. Planning
   Identify Champions & Build Alliances
   Foster Partnerships
   Adapt to Local Context

2. Implementation
   Outreach Services
   Capacity Building
   Study Tour
   Supportive Supervision
   Document & Disseminate

3. Documentation & Dissemination

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